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EXPLORING STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND AND BRAZIL: EMBARGO OR EMPOWERMENT?

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Purpose

This study recruited students who failed to meet set deadlines for summative assessments. Process termed widening access increases the number of students in higher education institutions (HEIs) presenting challenges in learning and teaching in online, conventional and hybrid contexts, impacting on student academic success.

Methodology

Using qualitative methods and in depth semi-structured interviews, 14 participants who completed assessable written work were interviewed. Using Freire's concept of empowerment (1971), this paper explores students' perceptions of assessment in two countries.

Findings

Results presented thematically indicate that student perceptions of the purpose of the assessment and academic qualification are at odds with institutional habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Several embargoes impacting on academic achievement were revealed.

Research limitations

The study uses small samples from Scotland and Brazil, and results may be complicated by the researchers teaching the students recruited into the study. Results indicate the need for further research to recognize the impact of shifting organisational patterns and modes of production within HEIs on the student experience of academic writing and assessment.

Practical implications

Findings highlight the factors that impact on academic success in HEI's for non-traditional students in particular

Social implications

Social class and educational background (habitus) are not factors taken into account when students are assessed impacting on ability to achieve academic success

Originality/value

This study recruits those participants normally excluded from typical research evaluations of student success.

This study explores student experience of institutional assessment practices in the contexts of widening access and marketisation in two countries Scotland and Brazil. Increasing the number of students in higher education institutions presents challenges in learning and teaching in online, conventional and hybrid contexts, impacting on student academic success. Using qualitative methods and in depth semi-structured interviews, 14 participants were interviewed. Building on Freire's concept of empowerment and Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', we explore the student experience of assessment. Results presented thematically indicate that student perceptions of the purpose of the assessment and academic qualification are at odds with institutional habitus. Several embargoes impacting on academic achievement were revealed. Results indicate the need for further research to recognise the impact of shifting organisational patterns and modes of production within higher education institutions on the student experience of academic writing and assessment. Findings highlight the factors that influence academic success in higher education institutions for non-traditional students in particular. Social class and educational background (habitus) are not factors taken into account when students are assessed. This impacts on capacity to achieve academic success. This study uses small samples from Scotland and Brazil normally excluded from typical research evaluations of student success.

Key words: assessment, qualitative research, widening access, employability, pedagogy

Introduction

This study explores student experience of institutional assessment practices in the contexts of widening access and marketisation in two countries Scotland and Brazil. This study forms part of an ongoing series of research on student experiences of assessment (McPhee & Soderstrom, 2012). Evaluation studies focusing on assessment often compare and contrast modes of learning, and student success using summative grades scores as determinants of academic achievement. Normally excluded from this type of study, are the experiences of non-traditional students who struggle to cope with the demands of the institution. Fourteen students from two institutions took part in the interviews conducted towards the end of the term, when students had experience of assessment. The aim was the generation of data that captured the student experience of academic writing, assessment in higher education, and how it relates to employment within the context of widening access and marketisation. A semi structured, reflexive interview schedule gathered rich qualitative data, which was subject to thematic analysis. The semi structured interview schedule was informed by themes from the literature.

The Theoretical Constructs

Based on Freire's concept of empowerment (1971), and Troyna (1994) on empowerment in education, we explore the consequences of institutional practices of introducing 'markets' in Higher Education (HE) to provide a theoretical framework to explain the impact of shifting organisational patterns and modes of production within

universities on the student experience of assessment. We use Bourdieu's (1990) concept of 'cultural and social capital' and 'habitus' to explore the impact of widening access, marketisation of HE on how students perceive institutional assessment practices.

The dominant practices of assessment

Boud (2000) writes that assessment is a value laden activity, underpinned by debates about academic standards and as a preparation for employment, as well as a measure of quality and achievement. The European Union definition of quality indicates the challenges to define it within the Higher Education Institution (HEI). Quality assurance refers to:

...an organisation (that) guarantee that the product or service it offers meets the accepted standards. While quality improvement refers to 'anything that enhances and organisations ability to meet quality requirements' (ESS Quality Glossary 2010).

Assessments in HEI are underpinned by the challenges to meet definitions of quality assurance, and professional and discipline requirements. As a result assessment practices can often construe the learner as a passive subject, subjected to the practices of the institutions to confirm learning has taken place. In understanding the dominant practices of assessment, Boud and Falchicov (2007:4) helpfully indicate that:

...assessment would be less of a problem if we could be assured that what occurs under the guise of assessment appropriately influenced student learning...commonly, assessment focuses little on the processes of learning and on how students will learn after the point of assessment.

These practices conform to the needs of bureaucratic procedures over which students have no say, and little control.

Neo liberalism and marketization

Over the years changes in HE have occurred globally and an increasing number of universities operate using business models that require an increased number of students. Scotland and Brazil have recently begun processes of democratising education and widening access, key drivers of employment and economic success (Costa, 2013; Riddell et al., 2013), which impact on teaching, learning and assessment (Osborne, 2003; Biggs & Tang, 2007) and student retention and progression (Thomas, 2002). Universities have been transformed into powerful consumer-oriented corporate networks (Rutherford, 2005; Lynch, 2006).

The corporatisation and marketisation of the universities has its origins in Neo-liberalism which offers a market view of who should provide education, the state or the individual (Tooley, 1996, 2000). When applied to education, it becomes a

service to be delivered to those who can afford to buy it (Giroux, 2002). The rationalisation is that it provides students with choice. As Lynch (2006:4) states:

The neo-liberal model is also indifferent to the fact that the state is an ineliminable agent in matters of justice. It ignores the reality that only the state can guarantee to individual persons the right to education. If the state absolves itself of the responsibility to educate, rights become more contingent—contingent on the ability to pay.

Defining the student consumer as autonomous, rational, market-oriented and self-interested has profound implications for the operation of education as a social practice (Lynch, 2006). It creates a culture of insecurity that induces anxiety, competition, and indifference to the vulnerable (Lynch, 2006).

Widening access, diversity and non-traditional students

Despite political decisions all over the world to widen access to HE to promote social mobility through education, over the last 50 years research has shown that not only has there been little class mobility in education (Clancy, 1988, 1995, 2001; Raftery & Hout, 1993; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993; Archer et al., 2002; Lynch, 2006) but there is little hope for this to happen even in prosperous countries (Lynch, 2006).

In recent years, many universities have suffered a decline in the enrolment of students of 'traditional' age (17-24 years). Non-traditional students in HE may have little or no family history of HE experiences, and many will include socio-economically disadvantaged students, students from ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities (Zinciewicz & Trapp, 2004:5, Taylor & House, 2010: 46).

Universities by increasing student numbers recruit students from a wide and diverse social and economic backgrounds, and while this is to be welcomed in both Scotland and Brazil, older students with less recent or little experience of further education, can struggle with academic pressure of meeting standards required to pass assessments, particularly written assessments. As Taylor and House (2010: 48-49) point out:

There has been much effort on encouraging non-traditional students to enter HEI. However, attracting students from low income backgrounds is not enough; support is often required as it is likely that such students are more likely to need to work longer hours in paid employment to supplement their student loan.

This indicates that there are several obstacles to be overcome by both full and part-time students in learning and understanding the rules, practices, and habits within academia. These rules include time management, reading and structuring assignments, understanding what tutors want and what advice and support can be offered (Bowl, 2001). As many non-traditional students will have to work long hours to pay for tuition, or have responsibilities for looking after children and have family and community expectations, they may struggle to learn and cope with institutional rules and practices.

Cultural Capital and Institutional Habitus

For Bourdieu (1984) cultural capital exists in three forms: (i) embodied; (ii) objectified, and (iii) institutionalised. Mode of speech and accent are examples of embodied cultural capital, while owning a personal computer is an example of cultural capital in its objectified state. Cultural capital in institutional form refers to qualifications that symbolise cultural competence and authority.

Habitus, Bourdieu's most influential yet ambiguous concept, refers to the physical embodiment of cultural capital in individuals, and deeply ingrained structural practices, used by Bourdieu to refer to the norms and practices of particular social classes or groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). It is created through social, rather than individual processes leading to patterns that are enduring and transferrable from one context to another, but that also shift in relation to specific contexts and over time. Habitus 'is not fixed or permanent, and can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period' (Navarro, 2006: 16). It is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by dialectic between the two over time: dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures, and that shape current practices and structures and also, importantly, that condition our very perceptions of these (Bourdieu, 1984: 170). As Thomas (2002: 430) points out:

The habitus refers to a set of dispositions created and shaped by the interaction between objective structures and personal histories, including experiences and understanding of 'reality'.

Central to Bourdieu's notion of habitus are that classes and groups tend to reproduce their privilege and their lack of it. In this sense, the affluent secure access to educational and career opportunities more easily than the less affluent. Bourdieu attributes this to their dominance of 'cultural capital', which legitimizes the maintenance of the status and power of the controlling classes. The culture language habits and practices of dominant classes enable them to subjugate other social groups.

Bourdieu (1984) echoing Illich (1971) and Freire (1971) considers the education system as the primary institution through which class order is maintained. Hence, the education system is socially and culturally biased. Thus, in this context 'institutional habitus' describes the practices of assessment that remain firmly rooted in serving the needs of the quality requirements of institutions, favouring 'traditional' students who may have fewer barriers in achieving academic success than 'non-traditional' students.

Thomas (2002) uses the Bourdieuan concept of 'institutional habitus' to identify the factors that promoted student success among lower socio-economic groups despite having limited social and cultural capital:

The responsibility for change is, therefore, laid squarely at the feet of the HE sector and institutions in particular; it is not acceptable to continue to blame new student cohorts, because unless the institutional habitus is changed they will continue to be discriminated against. (Thomas, 2002: 440).

Despite the severe financial and social burdens on non-traditional students (in this case referring to students who do not enter university within 2 years of leaving further education and school) such students persevered and were successful. Thomas (2002) highlights that the relationships between students and teaching staff seem to be fundamental to develop attitudes towards learning and coping with academic difficulties.

Marketisation and Pedagogy

According to Harvey (2000:3) the 'New Realities' facing HE are about responsiveness to the needs of students rather than 'downgrading' HE to training for employment. A degree may once have been a passport into graduate employment: it was indicative of a level of knowledge and intellectual ability. However, because of organisational changes and increased numbers of graduates, this is no longer the case (Harvey, 2000:7).

Mourshed, Farrell and Barton (2012) study on education and employment revealed that only 42 percent of employers believe their recent hires were adequately prepared by the HEIs for an entry-level position. 45 percent of students interviewed considered themselves prepared for a position in their chosen career field. To demonstrate the mismatch between what universities offer and what employers considered essential in new graduates, over 72 percent of HEI believed their graduates adequately prepared for the workplace.

Harvey (2000) notes that understanding 'New Realities' reveal searching questions about the relationship between HE and employment are, incidentally, questioning the purpose and structure of HE. According to the principles of marketisation if the customer is always right, the university is potentially at the mercy of the student consumer. Therefore, marketisation disciplines academic life via consumer pressure on higher education:

The culture of complaint has encouraged the emergence of a form of 'defensive education' that is devoted to minimising sources of disputes that have the potential to lead to complaint and litigation. Defensive university education encourages a climate where academics are discouraged from exercising their professional judgment when offering feedback or responding to disputed marks. (Furedi, 2011:3)

The processes transforming universities into service providers, and making education a commodity to be purchased by the student consumer commodifies education as a product (Barnett, 2011). Commodification transforms an academic relationship between teacher and student into a transaction (Furedi, 2011). In the context of marketisation the university now provides opportunities to enhance 'employability' rather than transformative educational experiences (Chertkovskaya, 2013). Increasingly marketisation is typified by student loans and tuition fees that create students consumers, universities as service-providers, and degree programmes as investment projects (Rhodes & Slaughter, 2004).

Empowerment

Places of learning are not only both instruments of social control (Illich, 1971) that lead to alienation (Freire, 2005), but also potential places of empowerment. Freire (1971:4) states that education is a means for transformation that allows the development of thinking which contributes to the empowerment of people (Freire, 1971:9).

Empowerment refers to a process in which the result does not depend only on external agents but to the possibility of creating spaces that provide moments of discussion, reflection and actions with transformative potential that require active participation. It concerns the qualification of the individual to transform situations, bringing a new perspective to them once they perceive themselves as individuals capable of resisting the barriers placed upon them (Souza et al., 2014: 156-159). Education can also be an expression of alienation, and the instrument for further alienation (Freire, 1971:3).

Embargo

The term embargo means typically 'a ban on trade' when used as a noun, and, when used as a verb 'the practice of government to seize or impose a ban on trade'. We introduce the term to describe barriers, both real and imaginary, levied on individual students via structural factors and institutional practices related to teaching, learning and assessment.

To date there has been little research investigating the student experience of learning and assessment in the context of 'open' access to HE. Scotland and Brazil have recently begun processes of democratising education and widening access, key drivers of employment and economic success (Costa, 2013; Riddell, 2013), which impact on teaching, learning and assessment (Osborne, 2003; Biggs and Tang, 2007) and student retention and progression (Thomas, 2002).

The key gap in the literature is the lack of a student voice that documents how and in what way they perceive the function of assessment in the context of widening access, diversity, and marketisation.

Methods

The participants were recruited using purposive sampling identifying students who had struggled to meet required deadlines. All participants had received formative and summative feedback via the VLE. Using this inclusion criterion, we recruited 7 students from a cohort of 53 in Scotland and 7 from a cohort of 18 in Brazil, to explore phenomenological student experiences of the nature and function of assessment.

The Instruments

A semi structured interview schedule was designed, driven by the themes highlighted on a review of the literature on traditional and non-traditional students, widening access and marketisation to explore student perceptions of the purpose of assessment. The aim was to gather information about the students' age, employability, the programme studied, the highest educational qualification, area of residence, and when they last studied full time. It also contained open questions

about assessment, essay questions, the writing process, subject specialist knowledge, the support provided to complete tasks, and experiences of receiving formative and summative feedback.

The semi-structured interview focusing on these aspects allowed for flexibility in the participants' responses, and enabling us to capture students' accounts on their experiences and understandings of academic writing, assessment, and feedback, while keeping respondents focused. Fourteen students from the two different subject units across the two institutions took part in the interviews conducted towards the end of the term, when students had already had some initial experience on assessment feedback.

The method of structured thematic analysis using inductive and deductive processes was used (Neale 2016) and after a coding structure was compiled, all of the transcripts were read and analysed using this coding structure. According to Graneheim and Lundman (2003: 106):

In the literature, unit of analysis refers to a great variety of objects of study, for example, a person, a program, an organization, a classroom or a clinic.

Therefore the participants' experiences and understandings of assessment in aiding learning and employment are the 'units' of analysis.

The broader context: the Scottish and the Brazilian Higher Education Systems

The HE system in Scotland is slightly different to the system in other parts of the United Kingdom. In Scotland, many students move into HE at the age of 17 (rather than 18 in other parts of the UK). The Scottish HE system favours a four-year undergraduate degree programme. Students in Scotland have their tuition fees paid by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS).

In Brazil to address issues of social mobility, Federal and State institutions have created access policies, that allow afro or native Brazilian descendants and students whose family income is up to one and a half times the national minimum wage access to study in HE. The Brazilian HE system like Scotland has a four-year undergraduate degree programme. Federal and State institutions require no tuition fees. Students joining private institutions can apply for a financing (*Fundo de Financiamento Estudantil* - Student Financing Fund) and/or a scholarship (*Programa Universidade para Todos* - Programme all at University) programme.

The context and participants

Since 1999, The University of the West of Scotland has offered online flexible postgraduate programmes in social sciences. The Faculdade Cultura Inglesa, São Paulo, Brazil, has since 2014, provided flexible courses in a teaching English graduate programme. Both programmes are supported on and off-campus, in a *blended learning* or an *integrated learning* approach, using continuous assessment. The Scottish programme uses a 1,500-word midterm essay and a 3,500 end of

module essay while the Brazilian uses a midterm test and a 1,500-word end of module essay. Assessments are accessed through the VLE and grading and the Scottish programme feedback is delivered by Turnitin software¹.

The authors both self-reflective practitioners have evaluated their programmes, presenting finding on student perceptions of assessment. Often excluded from population comparison studies are the grades scores and perceptions students who struggle to meet institutional demands, such as assessment deadlines, and progression criterion.

Table 1

Postgraduate students in Scotland

Name	Age	Sex	Study mode	Hours (week) Employed	Highest qualification	Children
Mr JJM	41	M	F/T	16	2:1 hon's Chemical Engineering	0
Ms J2	39	F	F/T	04	2:1 hon's Social Science	4
Ms D	33	F	P/T	00 disabled	2:1 hon's Social Science	3
Ms P	50	F	F/T	40	2:1 Nursing	2
Ms M	32	F	P/T	10	2:2 Social Medicine	1
Mr F	23	M	F/T	10	BA Commercial Music	0
Ms J1	24	F	F/T	10	2:1 BA Graphic Design	0

Table 1 refers to the postgraduate students in Scotland and it indicates that the participants' age ranged from 23-50; five were full time students and two used a blended mix of both off and on campus learning. Four had dependent children. Six had paid work to supplement their incomes to allow them to study. One did not work, being registered disabled as profoundly deaf.

Table 2

Graduate students in Brazil

Name	Age	Sex	Study mode	Hours (week) Employed	Highest qualification	Children
Ms F	19	F	P/T	44	High School	0
Ms C	33	F	F/T	40	Specialization – Law	0
Ms G	27	F	F/T	35	BA – International Relations	0
Ms M	29	F	F/T	42	Technical course – Computer networking	0
Mr A	28	M	F/T	40	Specialization – not mentioned	0
Mr M	48	M	F/T	44	BA – Library	0
Ms P	29	F	F/T	0 – Disabled	BA – Marketing	0

Table 2 refers to the graduate students in Brazil which indicates that the participants' age ranged from 19-48, all but one was employed full time, and the one registered

disabled did not work. Three of them are part of a student financing fund to allow them to study. None had dependent children.

Results from Scotland

Participants were asked about the function of assessment. Ms J2 indicates that assessment is a test of knowledge, referring to the 'core material', that is, the minimum reading made available in the VLE which is required to meet the learning outcomes for the module:

It's to **see if you've learned** what you are supposed to learn over your trimester at university ... **To see what your knowledge is**, to **see if you've taken in the core material or went above** the core material.

Ms J1 reveals that assessment of academic ability is a source of stress:

... **I suppose it's almost as if someone's sort of checking up on you**
... **I get a little bit nervous and a little bit scared.**

For Mr JJM assessment is a test of critical ability, insisting that his beliefs about his specialist subject are irrelevant if he attempts to demonstrate objectivity:

Well ... it doesn't matter what I believe or not believe as long as I can write balanced ... for a critical essay **it doesn't matter what my belief is.**

Mr JJM an engineering graduate, with a strong science background, is unsure of his ability in completing essays with the required level of critical analysis. His former degree taught him absolute laws, and relies on scientific training to consider the assessment as an equation. He explains his formula for completing the written assessment:

It's almost like **splitting into equal paragraphs so roughly** for a 3000 word essay **my aim is not to write less than 200 words for a paragraph and not to go above 550** ... (Mr JJM)

Accessing the assessment: the VLE

Participants were asked about the use of the VLE in accessing the assessment. Mr JJM suggests that he wonders how students coped without technology:

...its all-digital ... **it amazes me how people [completed] essays 20 years ago when there was less electronic availability.**

Ms M agrees that the VLE is helpful however the amount of material is overwhelming:

... I think it is **really helpful, these selected journals**, but obviously **you are expected to [read] beyond**. It can be **overwhelming; you think: do I have to read all of this** (Laughs)?

Support

Three sources of support were revealed in the data: peer, staff, and institutional support. Students organised peer support networks beyond the VLE, most often using social media, to organise informal support meetings:

...there's about two or three of us, **that'll sit and open up discussion forums and help each other**, and get out our essays and say, 'oh you've missed whatever.' **We're quite open**; we're adults so we help each other without actually copying. (Mr JJM)

Ms M relies on social media to connect with other students, however was unwilling to appear 'needy' asking for support. She explains:

...they have their own life and I have my own. ... **I don't want to be needy**. (Ms M)

Participants seek help from peers, and while helpful, some tension is revealed in the motives for seeking help, and sharing work. Sources of help are also sources of competition:

... It's not that you don't want to tell them it's just that **you're not sure whether they would want to tell you so you're** [kind of] conscious of, and no **we don't share, no we don't look at each other's writing at all**. (Ms J1).

Participants were asked about their perceptions of the usefulness of feedback given by staff members to them at their midterm assessment:

...feedback was really helpful ... you gave me pointers on what I was doing wrong. But **with another lecturer**, I felt like leaving the course ... It [formative feedback] **seemed like sarcasm in a sense. There was nothing supportive at all...** (Ms M)

University habitus often locates the source of academic failure with the student, and this is where learning support interventions are directed. However, accessing formal institutional learning support revealed negative experiences:

Effective learning is not absolutely good ... I mean couldn't fault them **I think they are poorly staffed** ... (Ms P)

Well, the effective learning is available ... but unfortunately I **just had a bad experience. I don't know what other support there is other than that**. (Ms J1)

Ms D, a student with a hearing disability, is fulsome in her praise for the support afforded to her in completing assessments:

Having a disability, I **have access to a proof reader**. I can ask for extensions but I tend not to ask for that. **The lecturers do offer a lot of help** ... (Ms D)

Barriers to academic success

Students faced several barriers in completing the essay: families (including young children), work, and often little time to study. Ms M a young mother of one child explains how she copes with academic life:

My daughter, **I used to sort her out and the do a little bit of reading when it was her nap time ... recently I have not been able to do that.**
(Ms M)

As many students worked to pay for tuition, it was acknowledged that this impacted on the academic experience at university:

... I've got to work to survive ... I think it's just a huge issue. (Mr JJM)

Engaging with the assessment meant that tough decisions were made: continue working and risk failing the assessment; seek an extension; or, stop working, reducing income, to complete the assessment. Ms J1 explains her decision:

... I've kind of cut back on [work] at the moment just while I've got my essays and things on, so nothing at the moment right now. (Ms J1)

For many, they were often the first in the family to attend university; which impacted on perceived ability to complete assessments:

...coming from a working-class background I was the first person from the family to come to university... I've put in quite a lot of years of education and still not getting it. No doubt I'll get it eventually. (Mr JJM)

Employability

Participants were asked if they believed assessments were helpful in making them more employable. Ms D states:

Yes, I actually do think it will help me get a job. As I want to get into research and it's teaching me how to ask the appropriate questions. **I think this will help me prepare for that.** (Ms D)

However, Ms M acknowledges that she will be seeking employment on graduation, and she worries about being tested on practice, even if she becomes comfortable with theory:

...it [assessment] makes you realise how much you don't know ... I would like a job to put it into practice; but then I think oh my God! What if I get tested? (Ms M)

The results reveal that participants consider assessment necessary to document learning and understanding, and somewhat useful in gaining employment. However, several barriers to academic success were revealed. That all but one of the participants worked over 10 hours per week (one worked 40 hours) and five had responsibilities to look after dependent children had an impact on ability to engage academically. While institution support was offered, participants created informal

support networks that were also perceived as sources of competition, impacting on self-esteem.

Results from Brazil

Participants considered the term assessment as broad and difficult to define. After some reflection Ms G describes written assessment as a necessary instrument to evaluate learning:

Actually assessment is a **very broad word...lots of varied kinds of assessment** ... I think **it's important to have something**, something physical like an essay, a test or a presentation to evaluate ... (Ms G)

The Purpose of Assessment

Participants understood that assessment serves several functions: for some it is an important process to check and certify that learning and understanding has taken place, and to test subject specific knowledge:

[assessment] means to **evaluate the knowledge** a person has in relation to a certain topic or subject. (Ms P)

For others, it is a process that helps the teacher to diagnose progress, academic difficulties and knowledge construction, as well as provide guidance to rethink the teaching practice. Ms G explains:

[the assessment] **is a way of diagnosing**, a way of getting the real diagnosis of **what the students have been learning and what they lack, their difficulties, their problems** ... (Ms G)

Academic Progress

In explaining the writing process, participants saw it as productive and a relevant challenge to gauge academic progress:

Many challenges ... there were **lots of possibilities** and people could address the topic from different perspectives ... it's something great, but it's **kind of overwhelming** when you think about it. ... But I think it's intentional and it's **good** (hesitation) but it **makes us feel a bit worried and anxious. But I like challenges so (hesitation) it's not bad for me to feel that way.** (Ms. G)

... it was a **sense of accomplishment. I managed to do it.** (Ms. C)

Participants noticed that the process made them autonomous, helping them to develop relevant subject specialist skills:

If the aim of evaluation is to check your technical competence I agree that **it helps us to notice our technical evolution.** (Mr M)

Some participants expressed concerns and noted several barriers to completion, in particular, lack of time:

I got scared because I think that everything is very difficult ... oh this is hard, it's going to require lots of work, I'll need to spend a lot of time working on it; I don't have time. (Ms F)

Using the VLE

Participants had access to numerous sources of information and materials to aid the academic writing process:

...we had **the material we used** during the course, **and texts, and some extra materials like the handbook, we have the library** (hesitation) I didn't use it but we had it. (Ms G)

It is interesting to note that access to the library requires travelling to campus, and this is a struggle for participants who work to support their learning. The VLE Moodle was considered useful as it could be accessed at any time without requiring travel or time. Ms F, for example, believes that accessing the VLE develops independence:

... **(Moodle) gives us autonomy.** I just think Moodle gives us even more because it makes us committed ... **it's easier for us**, if we have any doubts, if we need to talk, if we need to ask something. (Ms F)

On the other hand, Ms C expressed resistance to use of the VLE, preferring to seek the tutor:

I wanted you to sit with me to talk about it ... I don't want to look at it on the computer ... I need to talk, to sit down. To me that makes much more sense. Maybe I would memorize my feedback better or understand it better. (Ms C).

Seeking formal help

Impact of institutional and disciplinary *ownership* of the rules, conventions and practices of academic writing were sources of much stress. However, finding time to meet with the tutor could minimize these:

The way I got the feedback showed that you cared (hesitation) you care about the student ... **it's not just about what is wrong or right (hesitation) but it's to indicate, make us think, what we could have done, what was nice ... It makes us feel important... And it was pretty clear, very clear.** (Ms F)

The main support received was from the teacher who, according to participants, was available, promptly replied providing feedback on the content and text organization:

There were the guidelines ... **you were following us. You gave us feedback in the middle of the process.** So, I felt more relaxed. (Mr M)

Participants also used less formal sources of help, and shared ideas via email in addition to seeking and receiving formal help and support from their tutor:

The tutor ... I talked to you and I could get your feedback...I showed you the skeleton and you said ok ...oh, we had the material we used during the course, and texts, and some extra materials like the handbook, we have the library (hesitation) I didn't use it but we had it (Ms G).

Participants considered feedback meaningful, relevant, allowing them space to reconsider aspects, look for alternatives, showing how and what to improve in terms of content and organisation:

That was great ... I really liked **the way you corrected it because we could see exactly where we should pay attention** in terms of mistakes, or getting confused ... (Ms G)

It made sense in relation to what that I had to do better. I think it also gave some direction ... the feedback also brings a certain security to the student to know what he has to improve ... (Mr A)

Barriers to academic success

All of the participants work to pay for tuition, and describe how this impacts on ability to study:

...time management ... I work long hours ... we had to study for the other subjects; do other papers ... I didn't have much time. (Ms G)

The institutional support offered to students often requires them to be on campus, to meet attendance requirements, or meet with their tutor. While virtual contact via the VLE and email was useful, results clearly indicate that finding time and in some cases resources to travel to campus was difficult for many participants who work long hours.

Employability

Participants were asked if the assessment processes were helpful in making them more employable. This proved to be a difficult question to answer. Mr. A, for example, mentions professional gain even if a limited one:

I think there has been a gain at work ... and academically. I think there is a connection between them [the assessment and employability] and I guess I couldn't see it before. I thought the academic part was one thing and the profession another ... I also had it recognized at work. I even had opportunities to have other duties. So, it was certainly something very positive for me and with good results ... I think I profit more from this course than the previous one I took. (Mr A)

Discussion

The results presented thematically reveal participants consider assessment an integral part of the academic experience and describe several barriers to academic success. All but one of the participants in Scotland and Brazil worked around 40 hours per week which impacted on the ability to engage with the learning material in

the VLE. Participants described several ways to resist barriers to completion, seeking support from peers, the teacher and the institution.

In Scotland participants indicate that problems in meeting deadlines and achieving academic success, particularly for non-traditional students are perceived as deficits with the student. Understanding inability to cope with institutional habitus a factor over which the student is responsible ignores and downplays the effects of institutional habitus on students in relation to assessment engagement and performance. In Scotland five of the participants had dependent children and had to work to pay for housing and study. Working had a significant impact on their ability to meet the demands of the institution, and the choice was to struggle financially, cut back on work, seek or pay for children to be looked after. Some created informal support networks to resist and cope with the demand of the institution. Sources of support could also be perceived negatively. While participants described several key benefits, seeking peer support was not always helpful. Differences of opinion could be perceived as challenges to self-esteem and academic ability. The participants indicate that learning was a source of empowerment and oppression. One participant described the experience as alienating, and that his only consistent experience was one of perceiving himself as a failure internalising inability to cope as a personal failure, impacting on the learning experience. Several participants were the first in their family to enter higher education, which impacted on how they coped with instructional habitus.

In Brazil while none of the participants had to support dependent children, all of the participants worked in excess of 40 hours per week. The participants had to rely on the tutor to mitigate the institution habitus in relation to assessment. They tended to utilise the VLE as a place to seek support and guidance, however for others face to face support was required.

Results indicate that similar to Scotland, participants considered inability to cope with institutional demands on their time as a personal deficit. In both cohorts there was a clear impression that assessment practices were useful in making them employable. However it should be noted that Mourshed et al. (2012) highlighted differences in perception between student and institution of how HEIs prepare them for the workplace.

Results reveal some similarities in student perceptions of assessment. Participants indicated in both Scotland and Brazil several embargos on learning. While participants resist several embargos, Institutional habitus could be perceived as fixed and unyielding.

Conclusions

One of the fundamental principles underpinning a global HE education system is the meritocratic idea that, irrespective of social background, all citizens have equal opportunity to develop their academic potential. However, evidence demonstrates that the majority of people who successfully complete university are from middle class backgrounds (Riddell et al., 2013). Widening access, a feature of the marketisation of education and global academic capitalism, presents challenges to

staff, institutions, and students. Despite clear differences in course content in Brazil and Scotland, results reveal similarities in student perceptions of the assessment process and its function. Participants reveal several barriers to educational success that include having to work long hours to support learning, family commitments, and in perceived academic ability.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction is useful in explaining why academic success is not universal and structural inequality reproduces educational inequality. According to Bourdieu, education in industrialised societies legitimates and perpetuates class inequalities. Success in education is facilitated by cultural or academic capital.

Freire (2005) posits that education should allow the powerless to regain their humanity, and in turn overcome their oppression. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that for this to occur, the oppressed individual must play a role in their emancipation. Freire notes that:

No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption. (Freire, 2005:54)

The connections between Bourdieu and Freire are useful in describing transformative pedagogies to reveal tension between institutional habitus in relation to the student academic experience of assessments. Widening access has increased student numbers, however institutional assessment practices remain unyielding in both institutions in this study.

We reintroduce the term 'embargo' to describe barriers, both real and imagined levied on individual students via structural factors and institutional practices relating to teaching, learning and assessment. Participants resist several embargos that impact on academic success, accessing help from several sources, including peer, staff, and institutional support.

The review of the literature raises deep philosophical questions about the problematic nature of changes in HE and the student consumers who study within them. Academic teaching, learning and assessment are uniquely human activities and are subject to the social-political contexts in which they occur. This study contributes to debates about what universities are for, and how marketisation impacts on staff and students. The data raises important questions about the relationships between assessment practices, widening access and diversity in student populations, institutional habitus and pedagogy.

Limitation and future research

The study provides small samples from Scotland and Brazil, and results may be complicated by the researchers also teaching the students recruited into the study. Results indicate the need for further research to understand the impact of shifting organisational patterns and modes of production within HEIs on the student experience of academic writing and assessment.

Notes

1. http://www.turnitin.com/en_us/features/grademark

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